# Organizing Your Web Site Content

*Good content is only the first step. Now, how do you arrange it so that people can use it?*

BY JP FRENZA & LESLIE HOFFMAN

In our last column we discussed the content you might put on your organization's Web site—everything from a mission statement or organizational history to an electronic newsletter, book review, or "media watch" on concerns relevant to your nonprofit.

But good content is only the first half of the equation when it comes to creating an informative and effective Web presence. The second half involves organizing that content in a way that makes sense—for both the material and your audience's needs.

## Don't Lose Your Audience

Everyone knows how to navigate the information presented in a printed piece. We all learned to read sentences from left to right and "navigate" a book by turning its pages. On the Web, the linear form we're accustomed to disappears. Those surfing the Web interact with content using hypertext. Hypertext lets the viewer click on a word and jump to another paragraph—either on the same Web site or in a story that might be part of another Web site anywhere in the world.

People new to the Web sometimes find the idea of hypertext confusing. Yet presenting information in a hypertextual manner has its benefits. Consider the flexibility of letting people use information the way they find most comfortable. Some people might read a report on the Clean Air Act from beginning to end. Others might read the first paragraph, then click on a hypertext word which takes them to the legislation as it was passed by Congress. Still others might click on a reference to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and explore the history of that government agency.

In short, hypertext is like reading a book with an infinite number of footnotes available at the click of a mouse. No other medium gives us this flexibility.

The strength of hypertext is also its disadvantage. With hypertext it's easy to get lost. Studies show that people's biggest concern about cyberspace is losing their way—a process known as "info-tunneling."

Info-tunneling happens to us all. We find a Web site we like, we click on something that catches our attention, we click further, further, and further still. Before we know it we are absolutely lost, can't remember where we came from, and aren't sure where we've ended up.

How do you keep info-tunneling from occurring on your Web site? The

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best way is to organize your content as clearly and logically as you can. Structure material so that visitors can move around your site without losing track of the course they've taken and the distances they've traveled.

## Make It Easy to Surf

When you organize content for your Web site, group your information into categories. Suppose you plan to include your organization's mission statement, history, board of directors, staff members, and projects. All this information could fit under "About Our Organization." As you look through your Web content, you'll see that information breaks into logical sections. These sections form the basis of your Web site's structure.

Look at the example from CNN's Web site (Figure 1). As you can imagine, this site is enormous, perhaps tens of thousands of pages with hundreds of new ones added every day. Despite its size, however, Web newcomers can move from section to section and retain a clear understanding of where they are without getting lost. That's because CNN has divided its information into logical sections: world news, U.S. news, local news, weather, sports, science and technology, travel, style, showbiz, and so on.

Another example of an easy-to-navigate Web site is the Foundation on the Prevention and Early Resolution of Conflict (PERC), shown in Figure 2. At a glance you can see that this Web site contains six sections: information on the organization (About PERC), a newsletter

# FIGURE 1: CNN's Web Site



(PERC Bulletin), information on the organization's activities (PERC Projects), an educational section (PERC 101), an interactive chat room and posting forum (PERC Roundtable), and a section on PERC's partner (Cornell/PERC Institute).

Suppose you're surfing and come to the PERC home page. You see the PERC 101 section, which is an educational module to teach people about conflict resolution. Initially you might not know what
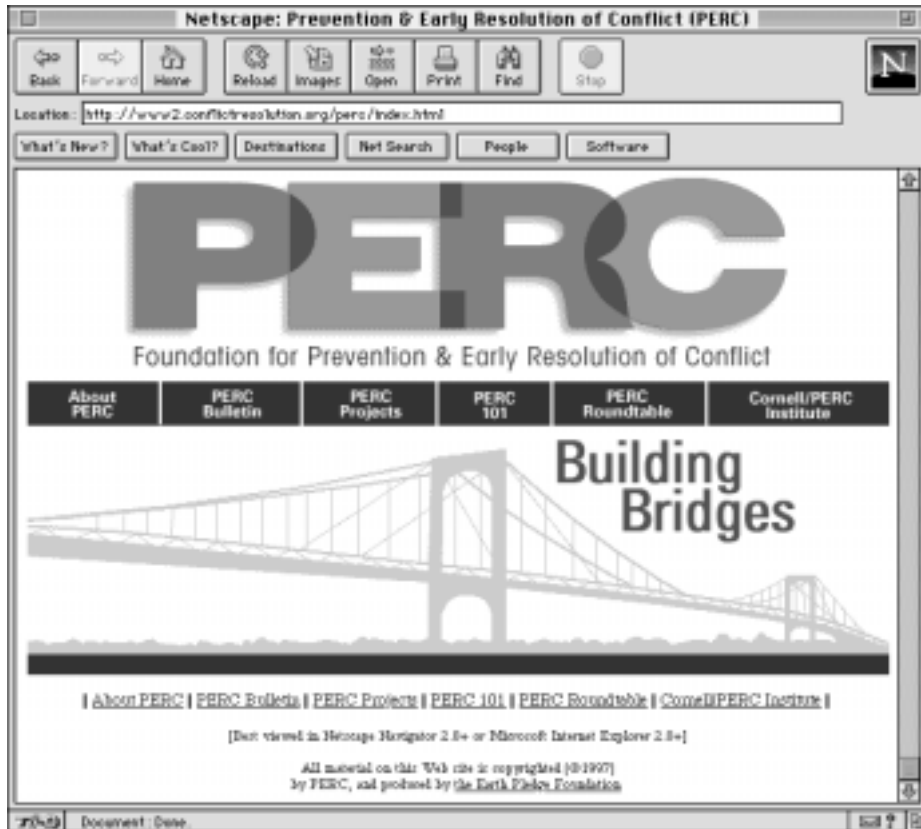
PERC 101 is about, but once you've looked at its content you'll remember what that section of the site contains. That's because PERC has made its navigation icons clear and easy to remember. It has also kept the names of its sections short. "PERC 101" is better on a button than "This section presents an educational learning module on the principles of conflict resolution." Try fitting that on an icon and see how it looks!

## Navigation Tips and Tricks

As you design your Web site, here are guidelines to keep in mind:

- **Arrange content in sections.** To decide how to structure your Web site, first list all the content you have. Then group it into categories.

- **Limit the number of sections.** Include no more than six sections on

# FIGURE 2: PERC's Web Site



**Netscape: Prevention & Early Resolution of Conflict (PERC)**

Location: http://www2.conflictresolution.org/perc/index.html

What's New? | What's Cool? | Destinations | Net Search | People | Software

# PERC

Foundation for Prevention & Early Resolution of Conflict

About PERC | PERC Bulletin | PERC Projects | PERC 101 | PERC Roundtable | Cornell/PERC Institute

## Building Bridges

| About PERC | PERC Bulletin | PERC Projects | PERC 101 | PERC Roundtable | Cornell/PERC Institute |

[Best viewed in Netscape Navigator 2.0+ or Microsoft Internet Explorer 2.0+]

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• **Provide other clues.** There are many other ways you can reinforce the structure of your Web site. For instance, you can use headers that tell viewers which section they're in and how to get back to your home page.

• **Don't create a rigid structure.** The biggest mistake you can make is defining your sections too specifically. If you make this error, then every time you want to add a bit of information, you'll have to add another section or redo your site architecture. Be as general as possible with your sections. That way, you leave room for growth. ■

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These publications are available through the Society for Nonprofit Organizations' Resource Center. For more information, see the Society's *Resource Center Catalog*, included in this issue, or contact the Society at 6314 Odana Road, Suite 1, Madison, Wisconsin 53719 (800-424-7367).

*JP Frenza (jpfrenza@earthpledge.org) is director of the Earth Pledge Foundation's Division for Sustainable Media, a full-service Internet agency which builds Web sites for nonprofit organizations. Leslie Hoffman (lhoffman@earthpledge.org) is executive director of the Earth Pledge Foundation, a nonprofit organization promoting the principles and practices of sustainable development. Earth Pledge can be found on the Internet at http://www.earthpledge.org or by telephone at 212-688-2216.*

your Web site. Too many choices are confusing.

• **Use icons.** For each section, create an icon. These icons will be the navigation buttons for your site. Make them as clear as possible, since they'll be your Web site's road signs. If you use graphic icons, be sure they make sense. Internet users understand, for example, that an envelope symbolizes electronic mail. If you opt for text rather than graphic icons, keep them short. For example, say "Contact" rather than "Click here to contact our organization."

• **Map it.** It's a good idea to include a map of your Web site. Even if the site is well organized, visitors will use a map to find things quickly.

• **Prioritize it.** Some sections on your Web site—a newsletter, for example—will change frequently. Put these sections in a prominent place. People will have an incentive to keep coming back to check on new information. And you'll want to make sure they can find it quickly.

> **Include no more than six sections on your Web site.**